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"Homemaker" by Corrine Helman '19 draws on images of traditional beauty from magazines.

Beautiful *as is*

By Sarita Chourey

*Escalating beauty standards come with costs.
What happens when we confront them?*

For some women, relaxing their thighs while seated – from timber to dough – can be an act of courage. For others, it's wearing a sleeveless shirt or walking out the front door makeup-free, blemishes and all.

They're little acts. At least they might seem that way.

But these small changes can help lessen the costs of our appearance-centric culture. The benefits of discussing those costs in a group is a topic that Kerstin Blomquist, an associate professor of psychology at Furman, is exploring with her students: Can workshops focusing on what women give up in order to meet pop culture's standard of beauty improve women's satisfaction with their appearance? And can they decrease their disordered eating behaviors?

In her Reclaiming Beauty pilot, Blomquist created a modified version of the original Body Project, a program that helps adolescent girls

and college-aged women improve how they feel about their bodies and critically assess society's punishing beauty ideals. In addition to mother-daughter discussions, Blomquist's research took on some of the notable gaps: faith communities and older women. Both groups have been largely overlooked by programs that promote a positive body image and seek to prevent disordered eating. In Blomquist's pilot, the median age for the adult women was 51.

The original Body Project was developed by researchers at the Oregon Research Institute and Trinity University.

Blomquist and her students conducted all of the groups – nine for adult women and four for mother-daughter pairs – in churches in the greater Greenville, South Carolina, area.

"Doing it in the church setting was cool to see because that was already a place where people were coming to gather to share ideas and find support," says **Kate Baule '18** of the 90-minute sessions.

“From a psychological perspective,” says Blomquist, “it’s important to be culturally competent when doing any sort of intervention, so including faith-based components is vital. In addition, the faith communities’ shared values – including the notion that human value does not lie in one’s physical or cognitive attributes – provide an outside framework from which the women involved can more critically reflect upon society’s notions of what makes someone beautiful.”

Blomquist says the shared values in a faith community also provide a broader context for resisting societal pressures to look a certain way and “for adopting an attitude of gratitude and care for one’s body.”

As for the mother-daughter component, Blomquist says the goal was to increase the impact on mothers and daughters by increasing accountability for change in the home.

Elizabeth Lomas ’20, a research assistant since January of 2019, watched the exercises give way to moments of discovery within the mother-daughter pairs and noticed that pairs often expressed similar body concerns.

‘The thin, young ideal’

The workshops don’t tell women to abandon all beauty rituals. They look at the toll. What does it cost – physically, emotionally, financially, socially, intellectually and spiritually – to chase the thin, young ideal?

Smoking to stay thin, for example, often exacts a lethal price. But other sacrifices are commonplace and insidious: Stepping out of the frame of a camera shot (thus losing the memories from the moment); wearing high heels for their leg-defining effects but not being able to walk; judging fellow churchgoers on their appearance, rather than relating to them genuinely.

What happens when we stop accepting some of the costs? As part of a behavioral challenge, participants picked one of their habits – avoiding shorts, perhaps, or routinely straightening their hair to accentuate their bone structure. They then broke their chosen habit twice a week and reported back to the group on what it was like.



Furman Associate Professor of Psychology Kerstin Blomquist.



“Baby Girl” by Helman.

What stuck, what didn’t

What Blomquist and her research team found is encouraging.

Preliminary findings show participants significantly decreased key habits: thin-ideal internalization – thinking that one must be thin to be beautiful; body surveillance – taking

an outside observer’s perspective on your own body; and eating psychopathology – including preoccupation with food, eating or calories, the desire for a completely flat or empty stomach, discomfort with one’s weight or shape, and habits such as skipping meals and following a strict diet.

The changes stuck: Compared to those who did not complete the program, participants reported decreases in the key habits immediately after the sessions and when they were asked again six months later.

One boost from the sessions, however, was fleeting. Right afterward, the participants reported feeling significantly better about their bodies. Six months later, those effects had faded.

“I had no idea how often I looked in the mirror,” says Prosterman.

There was one other finding: Adult women’s satisfaction with their abdominal area improved significantly after the meetings and stayed that way six months later.

“Perhaps the things younger women struggle with – arms and chest and those kinds of things – are things that these (older) women have kind of accepted about themselves as adults,” says Lomas. “But the stomach is something that maybe is more difficult for women to accept, and we saw sustained improvement with stomach satisfaction. So that was really encouraging.”

Resetting the conversation

For Lomas and others who worked on Blomquist’s study, the experience left a deep impression.

It has been nearly two years since **Elle Prosterman ’18** worked on Reclaiming Beauty, but she thinks about what she learned almost every day. And her actions follow. Prosterman now wears less makeup than she used to and catches herself when she’s checking her appearance in the mirror too frequently – a habit that took her by surprise when she first noticed it during her work with Blomquist.

“I had no idea how often I looked in the mirror,” says Prosterman, now a graduate student in counseling at Vanderbilt University. Blomquist’s study showed her how to redirect her energy.

“When I do start to notice certain behaviors – that I’m conforming to the thin, young ideal – I can stop myself,” says Prosterman. “I don’t believe that that is

worth my energy, my time, my emotions.”

The experience encouraged **Amanda Hock ’16** to pursue her master’s in counseling at Wake Forest University and ultimately

practice as a counselor in Greenville, South Carolina. But it also led her to make different decisions about how she spends her time.

“I’ll wake up and be like, ‘You know what? I don’t feel like at the end of the day having to take off mascara, so I’m not going to wear mascara,’” says Hock, adding that in high school and early college, “I would never have dreamed of that.”



Amanda Hock ’16 (right) teaches a barre class.

For Baule, it’s a new sensitivity to “fat talk,” self-deprecating words about someone’s own physique or criticism of someone else’s.

“It’s such an automatic instinct to not like your body,” says Baule, who works at the Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

“I’m more cognizant of when it’s happening around me or when I’m going along with it or saying it myself,” she says. “I’ll catch myself doing it and saying things I wish I hadn’t said ... or I’ll try to respond in the moment. It can be hard.”

Hock, too, is changing the conversation around her. When she’s not working as a counselor, she’s leading barre classes. Hock is able to share her insights with her clients in both places.

“A lot of people do (barre) to look a certain way,” she says of the ballet-inspired fitness class. “It’s been really good in my counseling to kind of help my clients with their own body-image concerns but also in Pure Barre to say to women who come to my class, ‘Man, you are so strong.’” ♦